

THE BIRTH OF EUROPEAN CIVILIZATION





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BORINA



Part of the necropolis at the time of excavations

As a rule the greatest discoveries in archaeology have come to light by chance. The find, which about twenty years ago caused scholars, prehistorians all over the world to lose their sleep was no exception to this rule. In 1972 an excavator was digging a canal along the southern coast of Varna Bay at a place near the biggest Bulgarian seaport on the coast of the Black Sea. The excavator unearthed several skeletons and the young operator of the machine collected several metal objects, all coated in soil, to show to his teacher in history. He did not even understand that they were of pure gold and he put them in a shoe-box which he left in his excavator for a whole week before taking them to his teacher. It was only then, on his day off, that the youth took them to the teacher who almost passed out with surprise. The latter grabbed the phone and rang up the Varna Museum. In the following years archaeologist Ivan Ivanov carried out large-scale excavation works that brought amazing results, in providing archaeological science with information about the birthplace of European civilization.

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From the time of the very first finds it was clear that they came from an organized society which existed in South-East Europe at some time near the turn of the fifth and fourth millennia BC. Among the unusual wealth of the burial appurtenances, the gold ones stand out – the gold is quite rightly called the oldest gold in the world. The well-known researcher Blavatski, who witnessed the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb termed the find in Egypt as something that had been expected, but the find in Varna he called one of the greatest surprises, one which brought scholars up against problems that would be difficult to solve.

The Varna necropolis is on the northern shore of Lake Varna, and at present it lies 12-13 m above sea level. In the chalcolithic period Lake Varna was part of the sea whose level was several meters lower than the present one. From 1972 up to 1991 a total area of 7,800 square km of the supposed territory of the necropolis was researched. There were found 294 graves and, according to archaeological data, they date to the end of the Stone-Copper (Chalcolithic) Age in Bulgaria – the fifth millennium BC.

When the necropolis was unearthed, there were found no remains of above-ground traces of graves, such as equipment and mound embankments on the site. The grave which were found had not been specially built for the purpose. The places in which the skeletons and finds were lying had been dug straight into the ground. The layer of earth in which most of the graves were found is of impervious clay and this is the principal reason that almost all the bones were very crushed and calcified and the small thinner ones decayed.

The graves, found so far, can provisionally be divided up into three groups, according to whether there is a skeleton or not, the position of such a skeleton and its state. In



A sceptre





◀ *The grave of a chieftain at the time when the research work was carried out*

A vessel with ornamentation



the first group are the so-called symbolic burials (without skeletons). According to the number of burial appurtenances, the location and the types, they have been divided into four types. Three graves with particularly rich appurtenances, mainly gold, are of the first type. Different kinds of gold jewels have been found in them, the amount of gold being respectively 1098 g, 1516 g and 789 g. There have been also found copper tools, large flint knives and other things in the digs, but the most important find are the sceptres. They are like stone axes with purposely blunted blades and with wooden handles, trimmed with tubular gold wire. Along with all this, the large size of the gold bracelets, the copper



Zoomorphic amulet



An astragal

tools and flint lamellae point to the interpretation of these burials as those of male personalities – chieftains, priests, or combinations of both. The absence of skeletons indicates the complexity of the religious concept and of the burial rituals. The second type of symbolic burials has also no analogue so far. Almost identical in their compositions and the positioning of the finds, the clay masks of human faces in natural sizes is the most characteristic feature of this type. On the foreheads there are triangular diadems, in the places of the eyes – slightly bulging round lamellae, in the place of the mouth – a rectangular lamella and along the years, rings are strung. Two anthropomorphous amulets are placed under each mask. Such burials are known also in other regions of South-Eastern and Central Europe and are connected with giving birth and the pregnancy of women. This is the main argument for the interpretation of the graves containing masks to the personification of female deities. Here it could be a matter of the image of the goddess of fertility and of the goddess-mother or of the presenting of gifts to them. The third type of symbolic burials is of the type of empty graves (cenotaphs) known in later times. In them the appurtenances in kind and quantity are the same as those in which there are skeletons, but there are no human bones. The most acceptable explanation of these graves is that they are the remains of funeral rituals held for people who died away from their birthplaces. Similar burials – cenotaphs – are known in various zones and during various epochs, and even up to the present day, bound up with the respective burial custom. Of great interest are the graves of the fourth type. They are to be found at a greater depth than the others, but what is most important in them is the presence of human bones. These are not in

*A sceptre, ritual objects, jewelry, a marble vessel,
a bone idol and a flint knife*









Bracelets

anatomical order and bear traces of having been broken on purpose before being laid in the grave. Anthropological studies of some of these bones show that people had been buried with anatomical changes in their bodies – with open wounds which had remained a long time like that. In other cases, a thickening of the skull was observed which had surely led to psychic disturbances or epilepsy. Insufficient knowledge at that time also gave rise to a more special attitude towards the burial of people with anatomical or psychic abnormalities.

In the second group of graves there are skeletons lying on their backs but stretched in different positions. Most frequently the upper limbs are placed over the chest or the stomach, but in some rare cases they are stretched alongside the corpse. The legs are parallel to each other and stretched out. The burial appurtenances are placed according to their everyday functions. Around and behind the head the earthenware is laid, the tools are close to the upper limbs or on the chest and the decorations are in accordance with their designation. There are no significant differences in the quantity and kinds of appurtenances in the various graves. So far the particularly rich

burial No. 43 is an exception. It was unearthed in the neighbourhood of the other rich symbolic graves. The gold finds in it alone number 990 and weigh 1518 g. The jewelry and tools indicate that here was buried the corpse of a man of exclusively high rank. A copper and a flint point of a spear, the studdings of quivers and a bow and a large flint knife show that the man held the rank of a chieftain. The most characteristic feature pointing to his high rank is the sceptre placed in his right hand and resting on his right shoulder. The sceptre is in the form of a bone ax, gold tipped and with several gold tubular decorations and loops with which the handle was plated. Besides all that has been said so far, there should also be mention of the athletic figure he surely had, according to the anatomical researches and his relatively outstanding height at that time – 171-175 cm.

In the third group of graves the skeletons were lying bent, only a few of them being placed in positions turned on their right sides, only a few of them were placed on their left sides or lying face downwards. There were no considerable variations in respect to the appurtenances in comparison with graves with stretched-out skeletons. Anthropological researches into some of the bones show that most of those buried in a bent position had been women, while those in a stretched-out position had been men. Possibly, because of this difference in the graves with skeletons in a bent position, there have been found fewer axes and bone implements, while in most of them there are needles and bodkins, which are bound up with work done by women.

In comparison with the necropolis researched and dated at the same time as this one, the burial appurtenances in the Varna necropolis are in a quantity and variety so far unknown. The gold finds stand out among them. They are more than 3000 in

number and they weigh more than six kilograms. This excels all the gold finds of that epoch discovered so far throughout the world. Jewelry and other objects related to rituals, such as sceptres, diadems, zoomorphic lamellae, and pectorals among other things, predominate. Altogether there are about 38 different types and varieties: beads, rings, appliques, amulets, platings, bracelets, zoomorphic figures, etc. – all generalized and in the emphatically geometrical forms which were characteristic of the style of art at that time. Copper finds likewise hold an important place. Tools prevail – massive axes, hammers, chisels and wedges, while ornamental things, such as bracelets and rings are very few. The number of flint finds is considerable. They are of sizes unknown in other settlements and necropolises: some of the lamellae are 44 cm long. This makes them unusable in practice, something which has also been confirmed in research work. Of interest among the finds of stone and minerals are the quartz beads for the polishing of which the craftsmen had to have great dexterity and professional skill. Shells of the Dentalium, a Mediterranean mollusc, are abundant – more than 20,000. Several hundred finds of things made for ornamentation are from another Mediterranean mollusc – Spondylius. Beautiful bracelets and a large variety of beads and appliques are made of it. Earthenware vessels are of particular interest. They are found in almost every grave, one or two most frequently, but occasionally even eight. What is more important is that the vessels are very poorly baked and sometimes even dried, although there are some which are well baked. Besides the conventional and well-known forms, there have been found vessels of diminished sizes for liquid or food. Among the finds there are two unique earthenware vessels – a small bowl and a large tray. They are decorated with geometrical



A spear-head



An ax-cum-hammer

designs, full of gold. They are the only intact vessels of that epoch which have been found so far.

The discovery of the Varna Necropolis raises the question of a re-survey of the issue of the place and time of the first European civilization. According to the results of the researches so far into the Neolithic and Copper-Stone (Chalcolithic) Ages in Bulgaria in the sixth and fifth millennia BC, it is obvious that in the present-day Bulga-



The mask of a human face and jewelry



rian lands a local agrarian and animal husbandry culture emerged and developed at that time. The symbols of authority, listed above, have also changed the ideas about the pre-historic society, which has so far been considered to have been classless. The relations of this culture with other religions were sporadic at the beginning, but were abruptly intensified with the mastering of copper and gold metallurgies. A place of their own is taken by the find of the research team, headed by the Russian archaeologist Chernikh. In the second half of the Chalcolithic era (the time of the Varna Necropolis) about 30,000 tons of ore were excavated in the region of the town of Stara Zagora (South Bulgaria). Some 500-1000 tons of copper would have been obtained from

that quantity – a proof of the lively metallurgical activities on the Balkan Peninsula. The spectral analysis of the copper indicates that finds of copper, like those obtained in the Bulgarian lands, were also found in the central reaches of the Dniester River (the Ukraine) and as far as the town of Saratov on the Volga (Russia). This shows the extremely vast scope of the occurrence of copper and the wide-reaching contacts of those who exploited it. Probably this was the result of brisk commercial activities in nearby and distant lands.

The question quite rightly arises why a highly developed civilization, based on agriculture and cattle-breeding and whose main settlements were in Thrace, should be discovered here. An explanation can be put

A vessel with golden ornamentation

A sceptre, zoomorphic lamellae and ritual objects







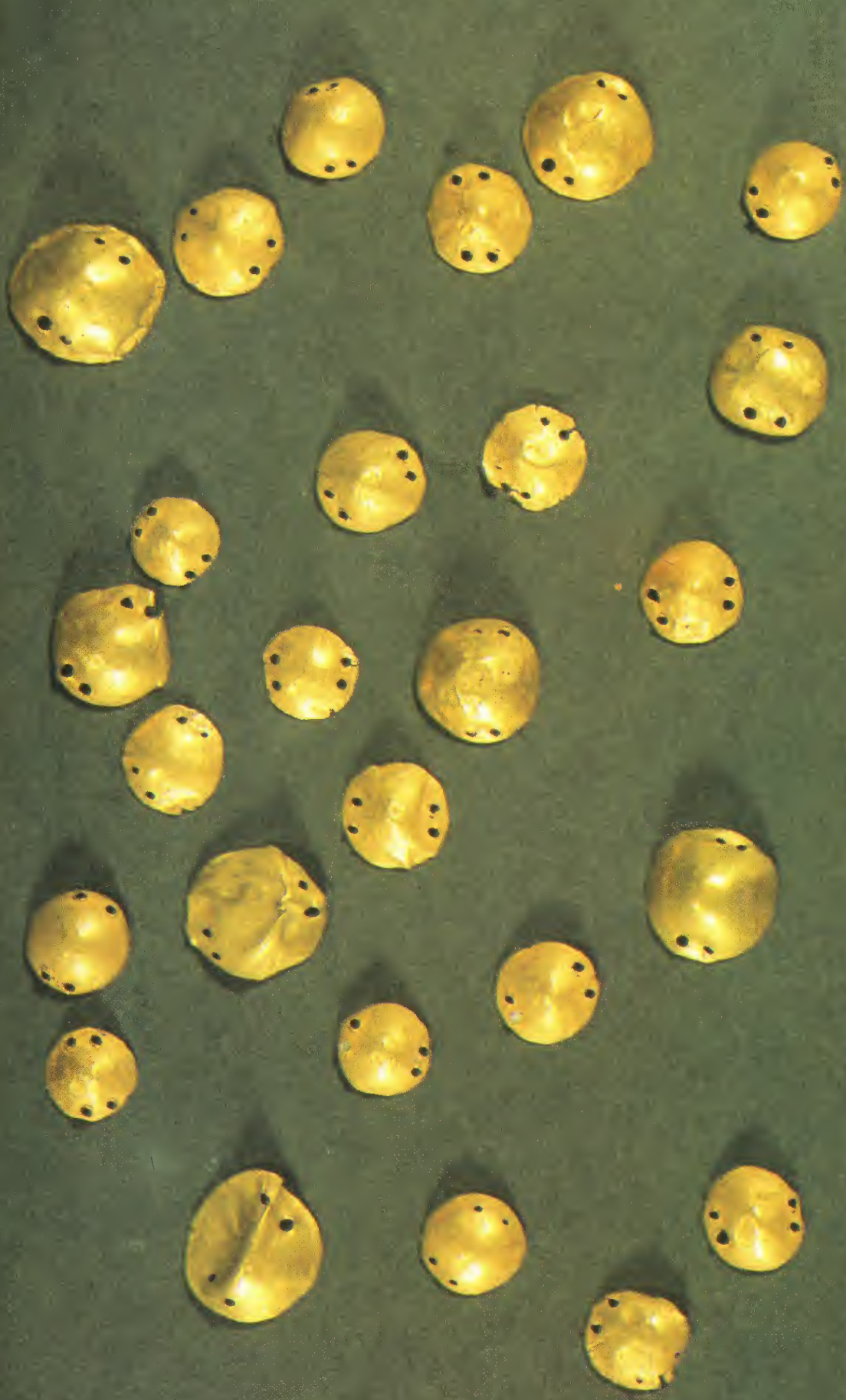
An anthropomorphic amulet, a sceptre and a diadem

forward after the part played and the place taken by the Varna lakes in the development of the Chalcolithic culture are elucidated. In the last few decades, as the result of construction works of the shores of the lakes, traces have been found of about a dozen settlements which existed at that time on the Varna Necropolis. Up to the present day they are from three to eight metres below the present level of the water. For a long time it was assumed that they were the so-called pile dwellings, similar to those in Switzerland, France and Germany. But submarine excavations and researches have shown that it is a matter here of sunken settlements as a result of the rapid rise of the level of the sea. The exceptionally favourable position of the complex of settlements was a pre-condition for an active life. Being the best part of the region and with a deep bay on the western shore of the

Black Sea, the Varna lakes and their vicinity were also the most suitable place for contacts with the nomadic tribes in the northern areas bordering on the Black Sea and the steppes. The growth of metallurgy and brisk trading made it possible for the region to rise to a higher degree in social and economic respects. Along the valleys of the local rivers it was possible to penetrate dozens of kilometres inland, and through these valleys the raw materials of metal and flint to reach the coast of the Black Sea. There, in specialized workshops tools and ornamental objects were produced. Then, by means of coastal navigation these goods started on a long voyage to the valleys of the northern rivers and to areas lying on the Mediterranean Sea. Then the products of the local population also began to come along the valley of the Danube and gave a spur to the development of Central and Western Europe.

In throwing more light on the place of and the part played by the Varna Necropolis and on the appearance of the first European civilization, a parallel should be drawn with the already familiar Near East cultures in Asia Minor and Egypt. Relations with the region of Asia Minor date to the beginning of the sixth millennium BC, but later they were interrupted and the cultures developed independently. It is difficult to compare the data, because of certain differences in the methods of dating, but according to the data obtained with radioactive carbon, in the present-day Bulgarian lands the pre-state form of organization took shape earlier than in Shumir and Egypt. The abrupt climatic and geographical changes that occurred at the end of the fifth millennium BC checked the natural development of the first highly developed human civilization by hundreds of years, and then it developed elsewhere, to the south of the Balkans and in the countries of the Western Mediterranean.

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